

Beautiful Tampa Bay

by Mike Cohen

Last year my family and I spent our winter vacation in St. Petersburg, Florida. However, when it came to shopping and dining, we found ourselves making the 30 minute commute to Tampa on a fairly regular basis. We liked what we saw and were sure to make it our base this time around.

The hip, urban heart of Florida's Gulf coast beats in Tampa Bay. Here cultural gems mingle with authentic history to create an atmosphere that inspires awe and adventure. Whether your quest is for art spanning antiquity to the modern era, sensational live entertainment or other untold delights, imaginative and inspiring thrills await around every corner.

Busch Gardens, the Aquarium, Zoo and much more

Like other cities when you want to play a bit of tourist, get the CityPass. It is only \$143.29 for adults and \$129.77 for children. This includes admission to Busch Gardens, The Florida Aquarium, the Lowry Park Zoo, the Clearwater Marina Aquarium and either the Museum of Science & Industry (MOSI) or the Chihuly Collection.

Busch Gardens Tampa Bay is the ultimate family adventure, offering 300 acres of fascinating attractions based on exotic explorations around the world. Located right across the street is Adventure Island's (www.AdventureIsland.com) 30 acres of water-drenched fun in the sun. It features

the ultimate combination of high-speed thrills and tropical, tranquil surroundings for guests of all ages.

The Florida Aquarium is one of the top of its kind in the country, with over 20,000 sea creatures! Here you can experience sharks, alligators, otters and more while encountering ring-tailed lemurs, hissing cockroaches and colorful chameleons in Journey to Madagascar. After exploring the exhibits inside, splash away outside at Splash Pad, the outdoor water play area for children.

At Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo you can see more than 1,200 animals, including manatees, koalas, elephants, tigers, penguins, giraffes, orangutans and much more.



Tampa's Museum of Science & Industry, better known as MOSI, is a scientific playground with more than 450 hands-on activities in the largest science center in the southeastern United States.

If you are in the downtown area, then I recommend you stop by the Unlock Tampa Bay Visitors Center. Kevin Wiatrowski from Visit Tampa Bay was kind enough to give me a walking tour of the downtown streets and he was very proud to show me this storefront location at 201 North Franklin Street, which only opened last summer. It is open Monday to Saturday from 10 am to 6 pm and Sundays from 11 am to 5 pm. Here you will get excellent local advice on attractions, restaurants, and things to do during your stay. The staff is very knowledgeable. Make sure to check out the exceptionally neat gift shop, which includes a curated selection of Tampa-themed memorabilia and apparel.

The Straz Center for the Performing Arts

While in town we secured tickets for Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets in Concert, featuring the Florida Orchestra at the magnificent Straz Center for the Performing Arts. A year earlier we saw the Broadway hit *An American in Paris* while in town. We simply love this venue and were literally looking for an excuse to return. The Straz is the largest performing arts center in the Southeast and the only one with an on-site performing arts conservatory. If you are headed to Tampa in 2018 there are some great Broadway shows booked such as *Forever Plaid*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *The Color Purple*, *The Bodyguard*, *Beautiful - the Carole King Musical*, *Waitress*, *Sound of Music*, *The Illusionists* and *Cinderella*. The spectacular tour of *Hamilton* will land at the Straz for the 2018-2019 season. You can also check out *Opera Tampa*, which produces the highest caliber presentations.

Hockey Night in Tampa

I made my first visit ever to the Amalie Arena (originally called the Ice Palace),

which opened on October 12, 1996. A visit here, regardless of the event taking place, is an absolute must. Start off by checking the schedule for the NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning. The Amalie Arena is a fantastic hockey venue. The outside actually more resembles a football or baseball stadium and before each game there is a lot of action going on. Amalie annually hosts more than 150 events ever year, which ranks among the top venues in North America.

Fox Rent A Car

For the best rates, consider Fox Rent A Car (www.foxrentacar.com) where you can find economy cars, family-size cars, SUVs, minivans and luxury or sport vehicles available for your discount rental. The Tampa operation is managed by Edgar Hernandez, who has been with Fox since the company first arrived in Florida six years ago. In addition to Tampa, their Sunshine State locations include Orlando, Fort Myers, Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Dining Out

When in Tampa, you must experience Florida's oldest restaurant and in fact the largest Spanish dining establishment in the world. The Columbia Restaurant (www.columbiarestaurant.com) was founded in 1905 by Cuban immigrant Casimiro Hernandez Sr. It began in Tampa's Ybor City, (pronounced EE-bore) as a small 60-seat corner cafe known for its Cuban coffee and authentic Cuban sandwiches, frequented by the local cigar workers. The original Ybor City location is nothing short than magnificent. Additional Columbia locations include St. Armands Circle in Sarasota, the Historic District in St. Augustine, Sand Key on Clearwater Beach, Central Florida's town of Celebration, Columbia Café on the Riverwalk in Tampa and Columbia Restaurant Café at Tampa International Airport. All Columbia locations are owned and operated by fourth and fifth generation members of the founding family except for the airport, which is operated in partnership with HMSHost.

Ruth's Chris Steak House locations can be found across the United States and elsewhere around the world. While in Tampa, we dined at the 350-seat 1700 North Westshore Blvd. location in what would mark my long awaited first review of this very famous restaurant chain. At Ruth's Chris, your last bite is just as good as your first. Their perfected broiling method and seasoning techniques ensure each cut of USDA Prime beef they serve arrives cooked to perfection and sizzling on a 500 degree plate. The menu includes seafood, appetizers, sides and desserts. For dinner let us recommend the Porterhouse steak for two - 40 ounces of prime beef with the rich flavor of a strip and the tenderness of a filet.

When on holiday we always try to find the best seafood restaurant in town. In Tampa, that would be Oystercatchers at the Grand Hyatt at 2900 Bayport Drive. The menu highlights an array of the freshest, wild and line caught fish available, organic produce and seafood specialties with a unique and contemporary flair. For our party of three we chose to share eight splendid oysters, an order of golden calamari fries, an arugula salad and yellowfin tuna, a two pound lobster and an order of large juicy sea scallops.

Finally, we had dined at the famous Bern's Steak House (www.bernsteakhouse.com) in Tampa a year earlier. We decided to return after our own dinner one night and back inside the world famous Harry Vaughn Dessert Room. Built in 1985 using redwood wine casks to create 48 private rooms, guests get to enjoy nearly 50 desserts, wines, ports, sherries, and madeiras. This represents a separate sitting. All desserts – ice creams, sherbets, pies, pastries, hot fudge, whipped cream, breads and crackers – are made by Bern's with the freshest and best ingredients available. Make sure you have a reservation or prepare to wait a long time for a table. ■

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